

ON KNOWING WHAT TIME IT IS

January 8, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Isaiah 60:17-22

Luke 2:22-40

"Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

-Psalm 90:12 (RSV)

Sometime this afternoon between the hours of 3:00 and 6:00, although it will probably be closer to 6:00, something will happen at Soldier Field that happens nowhere else in the universe. Time will actually be slowed down and virtually stopped. Joe Montana, the 49er's quarterback, or Jim McMahon, or Mike Tomczak, or whoever is playing quarterback for the Bears, will do something which is called, in the game, "playing the clock." By adroitly choosing plays, getting the ball out of bounds and parceling out the allotted "time outs" - a smart N.F.L. quarterback can transform seventy-five seconds into ten minutes. It happens in professional basketball as well. In fact, it has been suggested that the real game doesn't start until the last two minutes, which often extends into twenty minutes; then, there is always the hope for "overtime." Unfortunately, there is no equivalency to this in life; although we devoutly wish there were,... spend enormous amounts of money to purchase the life-equivalent of a football "time-out" or a basketball "overtime," and sometimes, actually become convinced, that we are succeeding. Metaphoric consistency demands, however, that we acknowledge that should the football game today end in a tie - it will go into a variety of "overtime" which terminates in "sudden death" - which brings me to the text for my sermon... "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom," or "a smart man or woman knows what time it is."

"If I could wish anything for a young man or woman this morning," said the college president in his speech at graduation, "it would be the wish that, early in his days and far ahead of some desperate need, he could come to feel that his own life had eternal meaning." And then the speaker cited Tolstoy who used to complain that we so lose the power to turn our minds to bear on important things, that only the near thought of death brings us to the sense of them. "This seems a pity" said the president. "It means missing so much now - this side of the hospital corridor. So much of ardor, so much of joy, so much of beholding." [Howard R. Lowry, College Talks]

It is something like that sense of time which the Biblical writers mean when they tell us that as the boy Jesus, living in Nazareth, was increasing not only in stature, but in wisdom. To be wise in the Bible is not to have knowledge, or technological skill. It is essentially to know what time it is; and to be appropriate in one's accommodations to time. "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom," the Psalmist said.

And the problem is precisely that we don't want to do that; in fact resist doing it with everything in us. It's not fair actually. We spend the first two decades of our earthly existence without any sense of reality about time. It never occurs to us that this does not go on forever. At the age of twenty - forty seems a century in the future. At the age of fifteen the school year seems endless. At the age of ten, a few hours doing something you don't want to do - practicing the piano, pulling weeds, drying dishes - feels like an eternity. I will forever recall a simple task I was assigned at the age of ten or so. My father had planned to turn the upper part of our hilly back yard into a garden. My job was to help clear the area by picking up rocks so that he could spade when he came home from work. The requirement was simple: a bucketful of rocks each day before I was free to do other things. It would have taken a few minutes. But my memory is of sitting in what I knew must be purgatory, hour after hour, mostly staring at the empty bucket and the rocks and wondering what I had done to deserve the monumental oppression. Youth has a very peculiar sense of time...

And then one day it strikes us that time, as a matter of fact, is not only moving, it is clearly accelerating. Years speed by. We can't believe how old we are. In a wonderful editorial at the New Year, Martin Marty quips:

"Now when I think of my graduate students as slightly younger than I, though their children are younger than our grandchildren: when I think that far from being the new kid on the block on our faculty, I will at year's end be second in seniority, one thought keeps coming to mind: they never told us it would shoot past so fast, did they?... One thinks this way at year's end, and finds plenty who share the thought."
[The Christian Century, M.E.M.O., 12/21-28/88]

As we write it the first few times - "1989" - having never really become used to writing '88 instead of '87 it seemed, we know... deeply, profoundly as the hymn writer puts it, "Time, like an ever-flowing stream, bears all its sons and daughters away."

There is a wonderful scene in Mike Nichol's new movie, Working Girl, when Katherine Parker, a very successful account executive specializing in mergers and acquisitions proposes marriage to the man with whom she has been having an affair. It's a funny vignette because she uses the language, not of love and passion, but merger and acquisitions. She puts her arms around him and says, "Inside I can hear," and you expect her to say, "a love song," or at least "my heart beating," but what she says matter of factly is, "Inside I hear my biological clock ticking."

The topic, of course, is mortality. One of the best teachers of preaching, Fred Craddock, tells his students that you can talk about it in the abstract until you are blue in the face without eliciting much more than a yawn from the congregation. But lean over the pulpit and tell them "Mr. Jone's son is dying" and they'll be up on the edge of their seats listening.

And so it is for all of us as the topic moves from the theoretical to the factual. At year's end three close friends died; a Synod Executive and journalist, a surgeon, and a former Clerk of Session; all men with whom I have spent good times; each rigorous, active, with lots of time left, one would have assumed.

I recalled my own father always turning to the obituaries in our small town newspaper, before sports, and my thinking it was peculiar. Someone has suggested that you can tell a person's approximate age by the section of the newspaper he or she reads first: comics, sports, world news, entertainment, financial pages, obituaries. It is a simple truism that the older you get the more relevant the obituaries become.

It presents our culture with a real dilemma; this whole topic does. In one of the last things he wrote before he died, an essay on aging, Professor Joseph Sittler observed:

"The fact that human life has a limit, that life moves inexorably toward death, is to the common mind of a technically informed culture of the West an awkward fact. Popular culture is invited to assume that knowledge, resolution, time and an adequate allocation of funds can solve all problems." [Gravity and Grace, p. 121]

Getting older is an awkward fact. We spend an enormous amount of our resources and energy denying it, fighting it, trying to reverse it. Some of the effort is admirable. Some of it is necessary to combat stereotypes of aging which have demeaned and diminished older people in the past. It is not necessary, not healthy - to stop loving, experiencing fully, enjoy being who we are, keeping fit, looking nice - ever. So part of our battle with the clock is admirable. And part of it is sick when, for instance, an earnest man leans out of the television set and tells me that the mystery of the ages and the resolution to my own angst will be found in a product which will restore my hair to its original color. We are obsessed with it - with an image of humanness which is perpetually twenty-five, svelte, trim, beautiful, flying down a ski slope or lounging on the beach, i.e. youth... Because we are so obsessed we are willing, eager in fact, to spend whatever it takes in cosmetics, surgery, dyes, paints, support systems, weight loss, to pretend that what is happening to us isn't really happening.

Sittler wrote: "We must stop this conspiracy of silence about death, and talk openly of it. One can go to church a whole life time and never hear a sermon on it." [Ibid, p. 126]

The reason, I suppose, is that the preacher is involved in the process; getting older along with everybody else. The preacher is just as selective about the Biblical materials which appear in the life of the

church as we all are about the magazines that appear on the coffee table... And I'll confess that it will be a long time before Modern Maturity replaces Sports Illustrated on mine, or that my AARP card has its own prominent special place in my wallet on top of American Express, VISA or the Cubs schedule.

We make choices... But the fact is that the Bible is very honest and very human on all topics - particularly this one. You have to be more than selective about your reading of the Psalms, for instance, to avoid encountering absolute human integrity about time and aging and dying. I was talking with a group not long ago about reading straight through the Psalms as a daily devotional exercise. Someone who tried it observed that it can become pretty depressing because there is so much violence, so much about the "pit" and the snares of the devil, suffering, dying... so much, that is to say, of the reality of our existence.

It is no sunny, superficial, "possibility-thinking" spirituality that we encounter in the Psalms, but a bold and honest faith that dares to look for God and God's redemptive purposes in the worst possible situations. That is, just those places where we need redemption, when all seems lost, when the airliner falls out of the sky, or the earthquake kills 50,000, or the test comes back positive, or when three close friends die... and you know deeply and profoundly the inexorable movement of time.

We have read one of the best of them this morning - Psalm 90. It inspired one of the most popular hymns in our language, "Our God, our Help in ages past, our hope for years to come." I wouldn't mind a bit if you looked it up in the pew Bible and followed along and became personally acquainted with it. (If you can't see it's not because age has dimmed your eye sight, but because the light in here was not designed to help you see; and if we turn them all on, the people in the balconies can't see the chancel at all...)

It is one of the Lament Psalms. It begins gloriously by naming the Lord as our dwelling place... "in all generations," a Lord who has been God - even before the creation of the world. "From everlasting to everlasting thou art God."

And then the lamenting begins - the Psalmist complains. It isn't fair; a thousand years is like one day for you, but we are swept away like the grass... even long life is soon gone and ends like a sigh. It's a very bold and very authentic expression of something which is in the heart of everyone of us. There is no pretending here, no denial, no sunny superficiality. This is real...

"So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." Wisdom means knowing what time it is and acting accordingly. Today's English version translates it with simplicity and clarity:

"Teach us how short our life is so that we may become wise."

The concluding section asks for two simple gifts - a measure of joy and gladness in the time which is ours, and the blessing of God on the work

we do - that in this brief time, we might do something which has lasting value. How very human and honest and wise that is... God is our dwelling place, our true home. We don't like the brevity of life, but if it must be, instead of playing games of denial, we'd love to be glad in it, to live it fully, and to leave something of value behind.

What I never noticed before was that the subtitle of this Psalm is "A Prayer of Moses, the Man of God." No one knows exactly what that means but one scholar, Walter Brueggemann, has come up with the intriguing proposition that Moses prayed it on that day at the end of his life, at Pisgah, when he stood looking over the river into the promised land "to which he has been headed all his life. Now it dawns on him that he will not go there. He embraces that painful reality but does not stop yearning." [The Message of the Psalms, p. 110]

Now it is precisely that integrity, that bold honesty about matters that we know and fret about and lie awake at night pondering, which are the glory of the Psalms. You and I can pray that Psalm. We have, in so many words, many times.

It's goal - and it is a good one - is wisdom. The wisdom which begins in the knowledge that our true home is God and because of that we are gloriously free to stop pretending, stop playing the games to which the world invites us, and simply, gratefully, "number our days."

There is a big issue here. Time ran out for Moses before he made it to the promised land... but the work of his hands was established and the people crossed over after him. Time does move, with us or without us. The important issue in the Biblical idiom is to be part of it, to acknowledge and embrace it, instead of wasting so much of it pretending, denying it, disguising it.

Wisdom is knowing what time it is. Wisdom is not putting things off, not postponing doing what we ought to be doing, not neglecting to tell the people we love that we love them, never neglecting to love, to give ourselves fully to those who love us and need us - who we enjoy and who enjoy us. The heart of wisdom is, I submit, an economist's valuing of time. It is to give ourselves so thorough to our life that at the end of the day we can rejoice and be glad and know that we have lived as fully as we were capable of living.

There is a wonderful paragraph in Frederick Buechner's book, The Alphabet of Grace, which follows the clock through one morning in the author's life. It is a favorite of mine:

"You are alive. It needn't have been so. It wasn't so once, and it will not be so forever. But it is so now. And what is it like: to be alive in this maybe one place of all places anywhere where life is? Live a day of it and see. Take any day and be alive in it. Nobody claims that it will be entirely painless, but no matter. It is your birthday, and there are many presents to open. The world is to open." [p. 36]

There is a big issue here. It is to be wise enough to know what time it is and to number our days. There is an even more important issue: the

biggest one of all... Are we really, as the complaint part of the Psalm laments - little more than grass which withers and fades and is swept away? Are we just animals in quick transit between our birth and death; "Accidental Tourists" through life? Or is there something eternal about the equation? Is there something here that lasts, that is permanent, something about us that participates in that "everlasting to everlasting" which is God. Is the power of the clock ticking, time running out, the ultimate world about us?

The Psalmist calls us, across many centuries to trust a Lord who is our dwelling place - our true home, a God who is from everlasting to everlasting.

It is not, for us, a matter of hope, or theological speculation only. We have celebrated the birth of a child recently. We have celebrated light in darkness. What that child means is barely able to be contained in our theological formulas and sermons. We dare to believe that that child means the power of time - which is power of death - has been broken. Our lives, because of Jesus Christ, are not a gradual diminishment, but an upward growth to completion and fulfillment.

Professor Sittler loved Psalm 90. It turns up in much of his writing. One time he used it as the text for a memorial address at Rockefeller Chapel. He concluded with restraint - but great power.

"He is the light in which things are beheld.
He is the light that falls upon things by which they are
beheld. And he is the light of the beholding eye.
He is road and he is goal, and he became the traveler.
He is where I began, he is my journey, and my home
at the last."

[The Care of the Earth, p. 108]

The promise of Psalm 90 is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Because of him -

"Our God, our help in ages past" is "our Hope for years to come"...
our beginning - our ending - our home at the last.

Amen.